



Pick Your Path to Health

Benefits of Spiritual Health

Someone once said, "There are no atheists in a foxhole." In our current national state of heightened awareness, this may extend well beyond the frontlines into our daily lives. Anyone who has a serious health condition, severe emotional stress, addiction, or other crisis may seek a higher power for help in combating the situation.

"I regularly ask my patients who are facing difficulties, be they physical or stress-related, whether or not they have any spiritual outlet," says Judy Ann Bigby, M.D., Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts. "We then talk about how they may use this outlet—a church, support group, or other avenue—to work through the problem."

Some research studies have shown that religious commitment, including worship attendance, prayer, Scripture study, and active participation in a spiritual community, can have medical value. It's important to note that it does not seem to matter which particular religion is being practiced.

Specifically, spiritual or religious practice has been shown to enhance prevention and treatment of mental disorders, medical and surgical illnesses, and addictions; reduce pain and disability; and prolong survival. In addition, spiritual treatment (e.g., prayer and religiously based psychotherapy) has been shown to enhance recovery.

But tending to one's spiritual health should be an ongoing practice not something sought only during desperate times.

"Being healthy is not just the absence of illness," says Dr. Bigby. "For many people, being at peace and having a spiritual connection affects their overall well-being and feelings about their health."

And few would argue that physical and mental health go hand in hand with spiritual health. However, until the middle of the 20th century, many Americans considered medical professionals to be the sole source for healing.

At the beginning of the 21st century, with many medical questions still unanswered, some researchers are re-evaluating the spiritual side of health. For example, acupuncture, practiced in the U.S. for less than 100 years, is one of the oldest, most commonly used medical procedures in the

world. Originating in China more than 2,000 years ago, research has shown that this holistic healing approach is beneficial in treating a variety of health conditions including chronic pain, depression, and fatigue.

While the use of acupuncture needles may be too much for many people, the traditional Chinese approach to treating the whole person-spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically-is gaining acceptance.

The number of Americans using an alternative or complementary therapy rose from about 33 percent in 1990 to more than 42 percent in 1997. In 1992, the Federal government established the Office of Alternative Medicine, now called the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM). Currently, 75 out of 117 U.S. medical schools offer elective courses in complementary medicine or included this topic in required courses.

Complementary and alternative medicine, also called integrative medicine, includes a broad range of healing philosophies and therapies. A therapy is generally called complementary when it is used in addition to conventional treatments. Complementary therapies include meditation, yoga, and support groups.

Survey results published in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that people used complementary and alternative approaches not only because they were dissatisfied with conventional medicine, but because these health care alternatives mirrored their own values, beliefs, and philosophical orientations toward health and life.

Just as many of our mothers and grandmothers knew that homemade chicken soup helped restore their loved ones to health, we know that their loving preparation of the soup was an important contribution to our return to healthiness.

"Regardless of what doctors and scientists think, many people believe that the condition of their spirit affects their health," says Dr. Bigby. "In my experience, people appreciate being asked about their spiritual outlets and ways to solve their health problems that do not necessarily rely on conventional medicines."

Tips to Enhance Your Spiritual Health

- If you do not currently have a spiritual outlet, consider revisiting your childhood faith or another group that interests you.

- If you plan to see a doctor regarding a physical problem, be sure to mention any major life events that you may be experiencing, such as menopause, divorce, or the death of a loved one. This may be affecting your health and may influence the course of treatment your doctor recommends.
- Build quiet, contemplative time into your daily or weekly schedule. Slowing down can help soothe even the most restless spirits.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign or to request weekly health tips by e-mail, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or TDD at 1-888-220-5446 or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov>.